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## THE SOURCES OF MILTON'S *LYCIDAS*

It must be admitted at the outset that we can seldom discover by investigation the exact sources of a modern poet's lyric forms. We cannot read the secrets of a mind when the physical brain that was the medium between us has been dust and ashes for two centuries. It is easy to see that Byron used the Spenserian stanza in his *Childe Harold*. It is incomprehensible that old Abraham Cowley, with the correct imitations of Ronsard and of Ben Jonson already in print, and with the Greek text in his hand, should have called his rough, shambling, irregular stanzas, "Pindaric odes." We have Milton's own copy of Pindar, and all the Greek texts of that period were clearly divided into the three regular stanzas of the Pindaric triad, strophe, antistrophe, and epode. So Cowley's mistake is one of the most ridiculous yet happy blunders in literary history. It is certainly reasonable to suppose that he was swept away into a more or less unconscious imitation of the successful and wonderfully harmonious stanzas of Spenser's *Epithalamium*, and especially of Milton's *Lycidas*. If this be conceded, then all the wide ranges of modern irregular verse, whether lyric or narrative, can be distinctly traced, not through the odes of Cowley to the lyricism of Pindar, but rather through Cowley and Milton to the Italian *canzone*.

No less a critic than Dr. Johnson alluded to this Italian model for the *Lycidas*, yet no scholar, apparently, has ever before followed out the suggestion. The Italian *canzone* of Dante and Petrarch, which is derived from the even more artificial *canzon* of the Provençal, is invariably a beautiful lyric poem, regular in form, and of some length. It consists of four or more long stanzas which look irregular upon the printed page, and it commonly ends with a shorter, more simple stanza called the *commiato*. In reality, each long strophe in a given *canzone* must be exactly like every other. The unit of composition, therefore, is the stanza, not the triad. Each stanza is divided by a very intricate rhyme-scheme into two unequal parts,

called *fronte* and *sirma*. This may well be illustrated by the scheme for the famous *canzone* of Petrarch beginning,

*Chiare, fresche e dolci acque,—*

where the letters represent the rhymes and the figures and the number of syllables in the lines, as follows:

(a b c a b c c d e e d f f)—13 lines.  
7 7 11 7 7 11 7 7 7 7 11 7 11

We have, in the first place, the vast learning and authority of Schipper<sup>1</sup> for the statement that this complex yet strictly regular Italian form was the model for all the ode-like stanzas of Spenser, Sidney, Drummond, and so of Milton's *Lycidas*. True, the latter is often printed as a pastoral elegy without spacing between its natural divisions. But in the Trinity college manuscript the *Lycidas* is divided by large initial letters into eleven irregular stanzas. The edition of 1638, though printed as a continuous poem, is separated by indentations into six parts; that of 1673 again into eleven stanzas like most modern editions. Clearly, then, the *Lycidas* may be regarded as a long, irregular poem. Now the conclusion, both in thought and form, is like the Italian *commiato*. We know that the Elizabethan lyrists imported nearly every Italian form, including the *canzone*, into our language. Milton himself became a master of Italian, journeyed into Italy, and also composed a short, irregular poem which he wrongly calls a *canzone*. This is in the Tuscan language. Finally (and this is a beautiful example of the necessity for textual comparison), upon looking over the Trinity facsimiles recently, I noticed that the large initial letters marking the stanzas were not indented, but were projected into the left hand margin after the manner of the early Italian printing. It is quite obvious, therefore, that Milton wrote the *Lycidas* in imitation of the Italian *canzone*.

It cannot be said, however, that Milton invented the dithyrambic stanza or poem. Many of the Greek choral odes are single, long strophes composed of lines of various lengths. The same is true of an occasional chorus in the *Aminta* and the

<sup>1</sup> *Englische Metrik*, Vol. 2, p. 802.

*Pastor Fido*, which, as Italian pastoral dramas, must have had some influence upon Milton's *Lycidas*. In English, Barnabe Barnes was most active among the early Elizabethans in importing Italian forms. In his *Parthenophil* and *Parthenope*, 1593, Barnes published several *canzoni*, one of which, for example, has seven stanzas of sixteen lines each, rhyming as follows:

(a b b c b a a c c d d e d f f)—16 lines.  
5 3 5 4 5 3 3 5 3 5 5

Here the letters represent the rhymes and the figures the number of meters in the lines. Turberville has also an interesting, regular poem of seven stanzas entitled *The Lover Obtaining His Wish*. It is a quaint, fantastic experiment in versification, adorned with many dissyllabic rhymes. The scheme is,

(a a b b c d d f f c e e f g f g h h)—18 lines.  
2 1 3 2 1 3 4 4 3 4 3 4

The most curious and influential innovation of the Elizabethans, however, was the development of the madrigal. From a short poem of six or eight lines, such poets as Barnes and even Sidney increased the number until the madrigal became a lyric of fifteen, twenty, and indeed twenty-nine very irregular lines. The fifteenth madrigal of Barnes is a good example, rhyming,

(a b a b c b a d c d a c d b c b a)—17 lines.  
5 3 5 3 5 3 5 3 5

Sidney's 56th *Madrigal* is a dainty poem, which by its beauty and variety of metrical effects may well have had great influence upon the countless lyrics of the age. Its rhyme-scheme is,

(a a b c c b b d d e e d e f f)—15 lines.  
3 5 3 5 3 5 3 5 3 5 3 5

It reads:

MADRIGAL 56.

Why dost thou haste away,  
O Titan faire, the giver of the day?  
Is it to carry newes  
To western wights what starres in east appeare?  
Or dost thou think that here  
Is left a sunne, whose beams thy place may use?

Yet stay and well peruse  
 What be her gifts, that make her equal thee :  
 Bend all thy light to see  
 In earthly clothes enclos'de a heavenly sparke.  
 Thy running course cannot such beauties marke.'  
 No, no; thy motions be  
 Hastened from us, with barre of shadow dark,  
 Because that thou, the author of our sight,  
 Disdains't we see thee stained with other's light.

Many similar poems, which are close imitations of the various stanzas of the Italian *canzone*, appear also in the longer odes and epithalamia of Sidney and Spenser.

These novel experiments, which may often be called wild or dithyrambic strophes, together with many purely English inventions, gave to the immense volume of Elizabethan lyricism a diversity and a glory that no subsequent age has surpassed. Milton himself wrote several short poems composed in complex metres, *On Time*, and *At a Solemn Music*. But I have not been able to find in any earlier literature a long poem with the free and intricate structure of the *Lycidas*. Some critics find Milton's model in a quaint production of Ludovic Bryskett, called *The Mourning Muse of Thestylis*. This, however, is a pastoral of one hundred and ninety-five dreary Alexandrines, rhyming in almost any fashion so as to leave one line unaccounted for and unrhymed. The true forerunner of the *Lycidas* in form is undoubtedly Spenser's *Epithalamium*. This first great ode in our language is composed of twenty-three long strophes which follow no definite rhyme-scheme. Moreover it departs still farther from the Italian form in having two irregular stanzas, one of seventeen and one of nineteen lines, while all the others have exactly eighteen. In reality, the *Lycidas* has no prototype. By sheer force of genius, Milton combined at once all the results of the preceding experiments, and freed English versification from the trammels of classic and mediæval tradition, by the production of an absolutely irregular lyric poem.

The *Lycidas* contains all the infinite variety, even the utter license of lyric meters found in any modern ode, yet is restrained by an inner, indefinable law and sense of proportion. I cannot stop here to analyze the whole poem. It is divided by indentations into eleven stanzas ranging from eight to thirty-

three lines. The majority of its passages are in iambic pentameter. The first line,

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more,

does not rhyme with any other line in the stanza, which has about the same length as the stanza of an Italian *canzone*, in the scheme,

(a b c c b b d e b d e b f b)—14 lines.  
5 4 5

While the second runs,

(a b b c c d d e)—8 lines,  
5 5 3 5 3 5

where the first and last are unrhymed. The concluding strophe or *commiato* is an exact imitation of the Italian model, rhyming,

(a b a b a b c c)—8 lines.  
5

It is quite unnecessary to more than allude to the beauty of the poetic diction, as well as to the wonderful melodies that are woven into these free and dithyrambic measures.

In this pastoral elegy, Milton has of course but continued the imitation of the Alexandrine poets, Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus. Yet his may be considered the highest development of this type of lyric expression. In conclusion, I am inclined to agree with Mark Pattison's enthusiastic praise:

"A period of a century and a half was to elapse before poetry in England seemed, in Wordsworth's *Ode on Immortality* (1807), to be rising again towards the level of inspiration which it had once attained in *Lycidas*."

And this is no careless comparison. For the last and most important step in this discussion is to point out the manifest blending in the poem of elegiac elements with those of the ode. In this respect also Milton is only following the example of the Alexandrine school, as was shown by Professor William P. Trent in the January issue of this magazine,<sup>2</sup> 1898. It is clear that the strongest portions of the elegy are those in which

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<sup>2</sup> *Sewanee Review*, Vol. VI. p. 15. January, 1898.

Milton rises to what he calls his "higher mood," namely the two digressions. Now Professor Trent has more recently set forth psychological and biographical arguments for believing that the sincerity of the elegy depends not upon Milton's rather slight acquaintance with Edward King, but upon that digression which is known as his attack upon the clergy. We know that Milton thought of taking holy orders, that he was deterred by the corrupt condition of the Church under Laud. Is it not natural then to suppose that he would lament most sincerely the death of the one promising young man who might be expected to reform the degraded clergy whom Milton describes with such scathing ire? Thus the digression, rising as it does to the mood of the denunciatory ode, may be considered the kernel or central theme of the whole composition. It is certainly the only explanation for the sincerity which everyone feels in each line of this genuine lament.

If these facts be accepted, all these metrical and poetic sources, as well as a critical study of the poem, enable us to call it a pastoral-elegiac ode. It is far more evident, therefore, that *Lycidas* may be considered as the model for the blundering and absurd Pindarics of Cowley, and so must have had incalculable influence upon all modern poetry. For the underlying principle derived from the preceding investigation is this: Just as Shakespeare would override the Greek laws of dramatic unity, and as Milton disregards the strict rhetorical unity of his *Lycidas* for the sake of a higher end, so the English genius in poetry may be said to have triumphed most often by yielding to its delight in variety of metrical expression, and by adapting without exact imitation all earlier metrical forms. From this transcending of strict metrical laws, in large measure, has come the greater diversity and the grandeur of English poetry. And in the discipline, no less than in the liberating of the English poetic genius, Milton is the supreme master.

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